

Xenophon, son of Gryllos, in conversation with Maria Pretzler

When *Omnibus* managed to organize an interview with Xenophon, writer, historian, soldier, and huntsman extraordinaire, great excitement was mixed with trepidation. He agreed to a meeting in his house in Corinth at some point in the mid-350s B.C., two hours after sunrise, and *Omnibus* made sure to brush up on the Attic Greek and to be as punctual as time travel and ancient clocks allow.

Xenophon's house is best described as Spartan: good quality and taste leave no doubt of the owner's wealth, but there are no signs of luxury. Everything seems to be arranged with a somewhat obsessive military precision. *Omnibus* was received in a room lined with scrolls, and there was no doubt that another literary work was in progress. For the moment, however, Xenophon was having breakfast. His invitation to join him almost sounded like an order: 'a soldier should always start the day with a proper breakfast, and so should (glancing at *Omnibus* quizzically) ... a travelling writer'.

While we shared bread, olives, cheese, and watered wine, *Omnibus* had a chance to get a closer look. Fit for his age, perhaps around seventy, he still has the looks of a man who is spending much of his time outdoors. He has impeccable manners, and it's as pleasant listening to him as it is to read his simple but elegant prose. You can sense that he has seen a lot and expects his opinions to be respected. *Omnibus* arrived with a long list of questions, but Xenophon needed just a little bit of prompting to talk about his fascinating life.

Omnibus: Let's talk about your early years in Athens.

Xenophon: Those were good times. My family was well off, and there wasn't a better place than Athens in those days if you wanted to learn everything a Greek man should know...

Omnibus: But the Peloponnesian war?

Xenophon: Yes, we were at war. There were some bad times, very bad times indeed, but if you grew up in those years, it seemed normal: the Spartans would raid the countryside, the Athenian fleet went out to fight each year, and we got used to

it. Once I was eighteen, I saw it as a chance to prove myself as a cavalryman: of course, I was lucky not to be involved in any of the really disastrous Athenian campaigns. But everything seemed to happen in Athens at that time: arts and politics, and you could see the whole world at our harbour, the Piraeus! You could watch new plays by Sophocles, hear people like Nicias and Alcibiades debate in the assembly...

Omnibus: And Socrates....

Xenophon: Oh yes. Socrates. One day I bumped into this somewhat dishevelled, ordinary looking man in a narrow street. He asked me for the place where food was sold. This seemed odd, since everybody knows where the market-place is, but I politely described the way. He wasn't finished: 'and where do men become virtuous and honourable?' I couldn't answer, so he asked me to come along with him. After that, I went to hear him as often as I could. Many have tried to describe what he was like, but it's impossible to give you a sense of the full effect he had on people. He was truly inspiring and thought-provoking.

Omnibus: But you left Athens and Socrates behind? Why?

Xenophon: Try to imagine those times. We were defeated by the Spartans, and it's awful to see your city humiliated. Many of us well-off young men had always doubted the democratic system – I still don't think it's the best way of running a state. Suddenly we had a new regime: thirty leaders, and quite a few were friends and acquaintances of mine; some had been following Socrates, too, but soon the new government turned into a terror regime. After that, we were all under suspicion. Most of all, I was young, and I was ready for an adventure.

Omnibus: And that's when your friend Proxenus invited you to join him in Asia Minor. Did you have any doubts about becoming a mercenary?

Xenophon: Well, technically, I was accompanying Proxenus as a friend – and at first we thought that Cyrus, the Persian governor in Asia Minor, had just hired us

The fact file

Xenophon, son of Gryllos, from Erchia in Athens.

- Born in the early 420s B.C., grew up during the Peloponnesian War in a wealthy family.

- Met Socrates in his late teens or early twenties (after 410 B.C.); became a follower. Many years later, he wrote about Socrates – probably in response to Plato.

- Joined the Greek mercenary force hired in 401 B.C. to help Cyrus take the throne of Persia. Xenophon's *Anabasis* describes the failed campaign and the Greeks' efforts to return back to Greece.

- Returned to Asia Minor by 399 B.C.; served under Spartan commanders, especially king Agesilaus. Followed Agesilaus back to Greece in the Corinthian war (against Athens' allies; 394 B.C.); exiled from Athens. Became an admirer of Sparta.

- Settled down on an estate at Skillous in the western Peloponnese with his family (around 390 B.C.); probably started writing there, in the 380s and 370s B.C.

- Following Sparta's defeat by Thebes in 371 B.C., Xenophon had to leave Skillous, possibly moving to Corinth; exile from Athens probably revoked sometime in the 360s B.C. Xenophon died in the late 350s, possibly in Corinth.

Xenophon is best known for his historical works, the *Anabasis* and the *Hellenica*. He was an innovative writer, who experimented with many new forms of literature, among them philosophical and political works, biography, and manuals offering technical advice. Most of his works cannot be dated exactly, and the order in which these books were written is disputed.

for a small campaign...

Omnibus: So when did you find out what Cyrus was really up to?

Xenophon: We had almost got to Syria when we realized that Cyrus wanted to overthrow his brother, the king of Persia. By that stage, nobody wanted to admit that they'd rather turn back, so we stayed; curiosity also played a part, of course, and the excitement of being part of such a big campaign.

Omnibus: Until it all went terribly wrong...

Xenophon: Indeed. Cyrus fell in battle against his brother, our commanders were murdered and we had to find our own way home through unknown, hostile territory. And I, still a young man, was suddenly called to be a leader. I learned more about warfare in those months than during the rest of my life. I still thank the Gods that so many of us made it back to Greece in the end!

Omnibus: Once you were back in western Asia Minor, you met the Spartan king Agesilaus. You have praised him extensively – but was he not also responsible for the downfall of Sparta?

Xenophon: Agesilaus. What a man! Socrates had been talking about ideal kingship – and Agesilaus made me believe, for a little while, that it might be possible. Agesilaus was everything you could hope for in a ruler and a commander – but even he could not withstand the greed and dangerous ambition which was taking hold in Sparta after the Peloponnesian War.

Omnibus: Because of Agesilaus you were also exiled from Athens. Tell us what happened.

Xenophon: I followed Agesilaus on his return from Asia Minor to Greece and straight into war with Athens and Corinth. I was with the Athenians' enemies: of course they took away my citizen rights. They say that exile is the worst thing that can happen to a Greek, and it was painful; but I spent some of the best years of my life in exile.

Omnibus: At Skillous – your estate not far from Olympia...

Xenophon: Indeed. In those years I found time to write and I concentrated on discovering the best way of running an estate. I am particularly proud of the temple I built for Artemis, and the festival we celebrated for her every year.

Omnibus: What about your family – Philesia, your wife...?

Omnibus had forgotten that it was not polite to discuss a respectable wife, let alone mention her by name. Xenophon was clearly taken aback by this, but

graciously decided to gloss over the mistake...

Xenophon: Well... my two sons, Gryllos and Diodorus, grew up there. We had a great time hunting together, even when they were boys.

Omnibus: And what brought you to Corinth?

Xenophon: My happy life was swept away by history... Sparta put the Thebans under pressure until they fought back and defeated them at Leuctra. Soon afterwards, the old order simply collapsed. Sparta's old allies united against her; the Thebans invaded the Peloponnese. My estate was suddenly in hostile territory for a well-known friend of Sparta. Corinth offered refuge for an Athenian exile with Spartan sympathies. I was already settled when Athens, now allied with Sparta, restored my citizenship. But it is good to be able to visit my native city again, and I keep up with affairs there... In fact, at the moment I am writing a book to advise the Athenians on how to restore their finances.

Omnibus: Let's talk about your writing. Do you mind that people compare you to

Thucydides and Plato, and often judge your works as merely second best?

Xenophon: I guess I brought this upon myself, didn't I? Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is such an impressive work, and yet, it remained unfinished. As an eye-witness of many important events, I thought I could continue the story. My work was never meant to match his style completely: it got more personal after a while, and I don't make a claim to complete objectivity. I wanted to relate what it was like to watch the old political certainties of my youth disappear. Of course, that's still going on, but in the end, I had to let others make sense of the chaos in Greece today: I don't intend to write any more history.

Omnibus: And what about Plato and your works on Socrates?

Xenophon: Soon after Socrates died, some of his pupils started writing about him, especially Plato. He writes well and has very clever arguments, but I remember Socrates differently. I wanted people to see another side of him, and I also wanted to defend him against some of the

How to interview an ancient celebrity

Short of hitching a ride in a TARDIS, there isn't much of a chance that anybody will ever get to interview an ancient Greek author. But it's fun to imagine what would happen if we could. This interview with Xenophon is a form of historical fiction, but that doesn't mean that it is all made up! The 'conversation' is built around the known facts about Xenophon's life, although where historians can express some doubts, historical fiction has to make a decision – for example, we can't be sure where Xenophon spent the last years of his life, but I 'visit' him in Corinth, because the only surviving ancient biography of Xenophon (by Diogenes Laertius) suggests that this is where he died; and when I make Xenophon give reasons for not moving to Athens, his arguments echo an explanation given by modern scholars.

Apart from the historical facts, we also need some handle on Xenophon's personality and opinions. His writings reveal a lot – for example his dim view of historical developments after the battle of

Mantineia in 362 B.C. is expressed with feeling in the last sentence of the *Hellenica*. The obvious practical experience with horses shown in the *Hipparchicus*, probably a late work, suggests that even in his old age, Xenophon was still interested in outdoor pursuits. At times, one discovers quirky details: Xenophon's liking for breakfast shines through in many matter-of-fact references, but he also offers explicit comments on the importance of a good meal in the morning. For a sense of what Xenophon's house might look like, one can read the *Oeconomicus* where a man called Ischomachus (clearly a stand-in for Xenophon himself) lectures Socrates on how to best organize a household – down to the way in which pots and pans should be arranged.

Would Xenophon have given his answers in exactly the same way? Probably not: we can't know what he might have said, or what he was really like. But his literary works give us a good sense of his history, personality, and opinions, and a fictional 'interview', carefully based on the sources and modern interpretations, can be useful to illustrate some of these insights.

accusations made against him. I simply thought that there was more to Socrates than one man can handle.

Omnibus: Thank you for speaking to us.

Xenophon: My pleasure. Have a good journey back, and convey my greetings to your readers.

When she isn't travelling through ancient Greece to interview famous writers, Maria Pretzler teaches ancient Greek history at Swansea University.